



Wellness Teams Work!

A Guide for Putting Wellness Policies into Practice in Schools

What is a school wellness team?

A school wellness team is a committee that supports schools in the implementation of policies and programs that aim to improve student health.

Wellness policies and the role of school wellness teams

Wellness policies are written documents that outline a school district's vision for supporting student health (see Figure 1 for examples of wellness policy topics). An effective wellness policy can improve food choices, dietary intake, and physical activity for children in schools. However, to be effective, a wellness policy must be implemented, monitored, and assessed. A growing body of research indicates that school wellness teams are key to putting wellness policies into practice in schools^{1,2} **This research brief summarizes the evidence supporting the importance of active school wellness teams in promoting wellness policy implementation in schools.**

Figure 1

All school districts participating in federal child nutrition programs must have wellness policies that align with national guidelines. However, schools can have additional policies, beyond those at the district level.

Wellness policies can address:

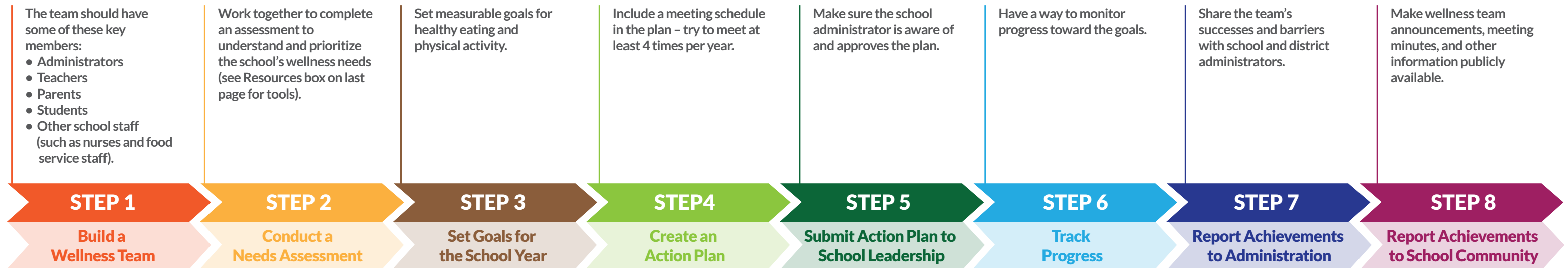


Limits on unhealthy food marketing



Physical activity opportunities such as recess and PE class

Evidence-based steps^{1, 3-5} for creating an active school wellness team:



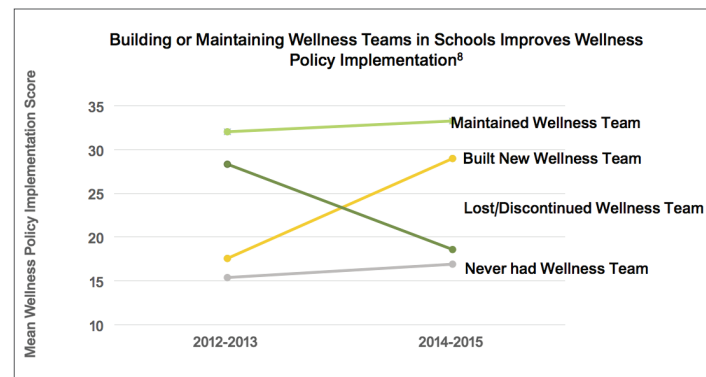
Why are school wellness teams important?

Schools that follow wellness team best practices outlined above are almost **one and a half times as likely to implement their school district's wellness policy.**¹ Wellness policies are effective for supporting students' nutrition and physical activity needs. **Healthy students have better attendance and are more academically successful.**⁶

Schools with a wellness team that meets at least once each academic year **have students with a lower average body mass index** compared to schools without a wellness team, or with a wellness team that did not meet in the last year. Having a wellness team that meets at least once each academic year is also associated with **healthy nutrition habits, such as students eating breakfast and eating fewer sugary foods.**⁷

"Having the wellness committee helped bring people together that would not have collaborated before. We had parents, special needs staff, the athletic director, the school nurse, kitchen staff, the school counselor, and our security resource officer. Having this group together enabled us not only to look at nutritional wellness, but mental and physical wellness and how it pertains to our goals of achieving total wellness for the students of the district."
– Food Service Director and Wellness Team Leader, Idaho

Figure 2



There is a relationship between forming wellness teams and putting wellness policies into practice successfully (Figure 2). Among more than 400 schools followed over time, those that continuously maintained wellness teams had better wellness policy implementation compared to schools that never had a wellness team. Schools that built a new wellness team had a sharp increase in implementation, and schools that lost their wellness team had a sharp decrease.⁸

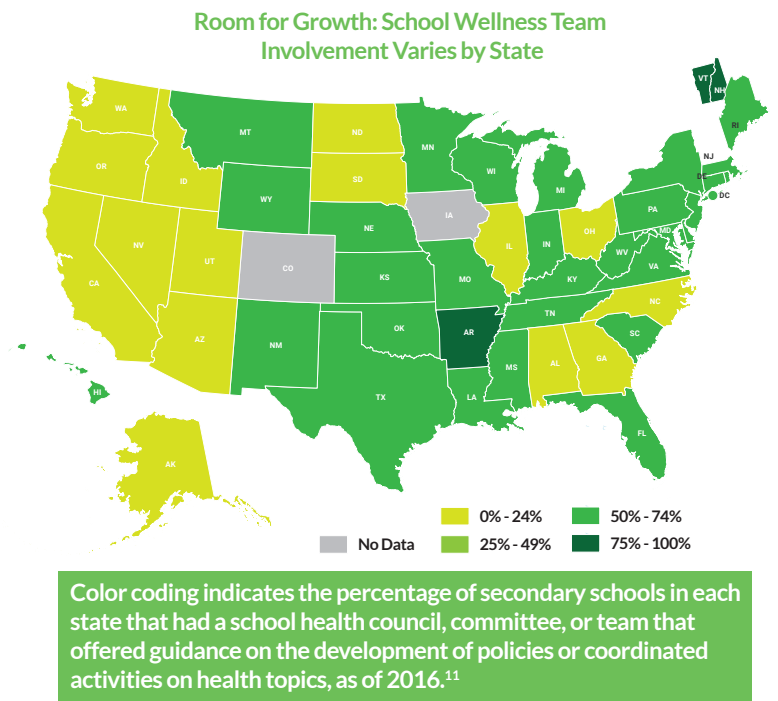
Additionally, school wellness teams that have received training and resources to help them lead wellness efforts are more successful.⁹

Where are we now?

Despite the evidence about the benefits of wellness teams, they are now less common: between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of schools with a wellness team dropped by nearly half (66% to 36%).¹⁰ Figure 3 shows wellness team involvement among secondary schools across the country. Among schools with wellness teams, 30% meet 1 to 2 times per year, while 68% meet 3 or more times per year.¹⁰ Finding time to bring committed individuals together for wellness team meetings is challenging, but identifying a staff member or administrator who is passionate about wellness can help raise enthusiasm among others.

"Getting buy-in was one of my biggest challenges. For months it was just one additional member of the school and myself at the meetings, still my goal was to recruit at least one new face each time. [We] helped provide the school staff, and moreover, its students, with a support system that successfully tackled challenging areas together like removal of unhealthy vending machines, reducing chocolate milk from the menu, and creating ways that children could remain active during the winter months."
– Community Member and Wellness Team Member, New York City

Figure 3



"All in all, we were able to integrate a lot of the conversations that we had into our action plan, and work with other committees to implement wellness policies within the school."
– Teacher and Wellness Team Leader, Maryland

Summary

Wellness teams help schools act on their wellness policies.^{1,2} Meeting wellness policy goals helps schools to fulfill each student's nutrition and physical activity needs. By forming or increasing activity of school wellness teams, schools will be better equipped to comply with federal guidelines and help students to stay engaged, focused and ready to learn.

School Wellness Resources:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's School Health Index (evaluation tool):** <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/shi/index.htm>
- **Alliance for a Healthier Generation:** <https://www.healthiergeneration.org/>
- **Action for Healthy Kids:** <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>

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